

# HARRY S. TRUMAN: DECISIVE PRESIDENT

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AT 7:09 P.M. on April 12, 1945, Harry S. Truman, the Vice President of the United States, was elevated by the sudden death of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the Presidency of the United States. He lacked a month of being 61 years old, and he had been Vice President for only 83 days when Chief Justice Harlan F. Stone administered the oath in the White House Cabinet Room.

It was the third time since 1900 that a President had died in office, but it was the first wartime accession. For Truman, a hitherto minor national figure with a pedestrian background as a Senator from Missouri, the awesome moment came without his having intimate knowledge of the nation's tremendously intricate war and foreign policies. These he had to become acquainted with and to deal with instantly, for on him alone, a former haberdasher and politician of unspectacular scale, devolved the Executive power of one of the world's mightiest nations.

"But now the lightning had struck, and events beyond anyone's control had taken command," Truman wrote later.

These events, over which he presided and on which he placed his indelible imprint, were among the most momentous in national and world history, for they took place in the shadow and the hope of the Atomic Age, whose beginning coincided with Truman's accession. And during his eight years in office, the outlines of the cold war were fashioned.

In war-ravaged Europe in those years, Truman and the United States established peace and held back Soviet expansion and built economic and political stability through the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In the Middle East he recognized the State of Israel. In the Far East the President imposed peace and constitutional democracy on the Japanese enemy, tried valiantly to save China from Communism and chose to wage war in Korea to halt aggression. In the United States, Truman led the nation's conversion from war to peace, while maintaining a stable and prosperous economy.

### ***Summons to Leadership***

The drama and significance of these accomplishments were, of course, not readily predictable when Truman took office April 12, 1945, as the 33d President, but there was an element of the fatality in the way he was notified that the burden had fallen on him.

Two hours before Truman stood, Bible in hand, before the Chief Justice that misty Thursday, he had entered the office of Speaker Sam Rayburn in the House wing of the Capitol for a chat. Writing to his mother and sister a few days later, he said: "... as soon as I came into

the room Sam told me that Steve Early, the President's confidential press secretary, wanted to talk with me. I called the White House and Steve told me to come to the White House 'as quickly and as quietly' as I could.

"I ran all the way to my office in the Senate by way of the unfrequented corridors in the Capitol, told my office force that I'd been summoned to the White House and to say nothing about it..."

He arrived there at 5:25 P.M. and was taken by elevator to Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt's study on the second floor. As he emerged, Mrs. Roosevelt stepped forward and put her arm across his shoulders.

"Harry," she said quietly, "the President is dead."

For a minute Truman was too stunned to speak. Then, fighting off tears, he asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

With her characteristic empathy, Mrs. Roosevelt replied, "Is there anything we can do for you? For you are the one in trouble now."

In the next hour and a half Truman learned the details of Roosevelt's death at Warm Springs, Ga., gathered his composure and prepared to take the oath in the presence of Congressional leaders, Cabinet members, his wife, Bess, and their daughter, Margaret.

The person on whom the Executive power of the United States was so abruptly thrust was, in appearance, not distinctive. He stood 5 feet 8 inches tall. He had broad, square shoulders, an erect carriage, a round, apple-cheeked face, a long, sharp nose, deep blue eyes that peered through steel-rimmed glasses, and thin gray-white hair that was neatly parted and carefully brushed.

Apart from the plain eyeglasses, the most catching feature of Truman's face were his thin lips, which could be clamped in grimness or parted, over even teeth, in an engaging smile.

Dressed in a conservative double breasted suit, with a 35th Infantry Division insignia in the left lapel and a white handkerchief peeping out of the breast pocket, Truman looked neat and plain. His only jewelry was a double-band gold Masonic ring on the little finger of his left hand. Aside from his speech—its flat, clipped, slightly nasal quality pegged him as a Middle Westerner—he seemed a typical small-city business man, pleasant and substantial, more at home on Main Street than on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Certainly he could not have been type cast as a Senator. He was not an orator, nor even a frequent speaker, in his 10 years as a Democratic Senator from Missouri. But when he did speak, he was listened to closely, for his remarks were coherent, forceful and usually brief.

He was industrious on Senate committees, and he served with distinction and fairness as chairman of the Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program. He was popular (“Harry” to everyone) and a member of the Senate's inner circle. He was known for his informal geniality, his homely language and also, on occasion, for his irascibility and brusqueness.

Unlike most of his fellow legislators, Truman did not have a college degree or a fixed profession. His formal education had ended with high school, and he had been in business from time to time, but mostly he had been in politics. He was a county official from 1922 until his election to the Senate in 1934.

An inquisitive and retentive mind helped to compensate for Truman's lack of schooling, and he employed it in prodigious, if haphazard, reading, especially in American political history.

Although he had been Roosevelt's choice as a ticket mate in 1944 and although the two men were on good terms, Truman was not, even as Vice President, a White House intimate, closely informed on the progress of the war. He had supported Roosevelt at home and abroad, but his personal inclinations were more conservative.

His private attitude toward Roosevelt was astringent, according to Margaret Truman Daniel's “Harry S. Truman,” published this year. His daughter's book quoted a desk-pad memo of 1948 that said “I don't believe the USA wants any more fakers—Teddy and Franklin are enough. So I'm going to make a common-sense, intellectually honest campaign.”

From the very first, Truman had to exercise his new authority from minute to minute, while his advisers briefed him as swiftly as they could. “I did more reading than I ever thought I could,” he said after his first full day in office. But he was aware of his inadequacies.

“Boys,” he told a group of reporters in those first days, “if you ever pray, pray for me now.... I've got the most terribly responsible job a man ever had.”

Truman's first decision was routine. The question: Should the San Francisco conference on the United Nations meet April 25, as scheduled? “I did not hesitate a second” in giving an affirmative response, he recalled.

His second decision—to meet with the Cabinet and ask its members to remain on—was also easy. But most of the judgments that followed (including Cabinet dismissals) were not.

“I felt as if I had lived five lifetimes in those first days as President,” he said of his “mighty leap” into the White House and global politics.

***‘The Buch Stops Here’***

In creating and carrying out his policies, Truman built a reputation for decisiveness and courage. He did not fret once his mind was made up.

“I made it clear [to the first Cabinet session] that I would be President in my own right,” Truman said, “and that I would assume full responsibility for such decisions as had to be made.”

Expressing the same thought, a sign on his desk read: “The buck stops here.”

With the war in Europe near its triumphant end, Truman had immediately to deal with Soviet intentions to impose Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and possibly to exploit the economic breakdown in Western Europe. Simultaneously he had to seek military and political solutions in the war against Japan. Both situations involved Soviet American relations, and both gave initial shape to decades of strife and conflict between the world's two major powers.

Whereas Roosevelt tended to be flexible in coping with the Russians, Truman held sterner views. “If we see that Germany is winning the war, we ought to help Russia; and if that Russia is winning, we ought to help Germany, and in that way let them kill as many as possible...” he said as a Senator in 1941. This basic attitude prepared him to adopt, from the start of his Presidency, a firm policy.

### ***Showdown With Molotov***

The Polish question epitomized his approach. This thorny matter arose from the Yalta agreements of February, 1945, when the Red Army had driven the Nazis from the plains of Poland. The accord, calling for a broadly based Polish regime and eventual free elections, was fuzzily worded. The Russians took it to mean a pro-Moscow Government; Truman read it to require a Western style of government.

“I was not afraid of the Russians and ... I intended to be firm,” he said. “I would be fair, of course, and anyway the Russians needed us more than we needed them.”

Determined to push his point on Poland as a symbol of Soviet-American relations, Truman had his first personal exchange, tart and brusque, with Vyacheslav M. Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, in Washington on April 22 and 23, 1945. The President used “words of one syllable” to convey his insistence that Poland be “free and independent.”

“I have never been talked to like that in my life,” Molotov complained.

“Carry out your agreements, and you won't get talked to like that,” his host retorted.

After much pulling and hauling, Poland got a regime that the United States recognized, but not before Truman's dislike of Russian diplomatic in-fighting had hardened.

“Force is the only thing the Russians understand,” he concluded, and force in one guise or another was to underlay his subsequent dealings with Moscow and the Communist bloc.

Even so, Truman got along rather well with Josef Stalin, the Soviet dictator, whom he met for the first time at the Potsdam Conference in July, 1945. “I liked him a lot,” Truman said, adding that, of course, “Uncle Joe” (as he called Stalin behind his back) “didn’t mean what he said” and consistently broke his word.

In the foreground of Truman's dealings with Stalin at Potsdam and afterward was the atomic-bomb project. Started in the deepest secrecy in the early days of World War II, it was on the verge of producing its first explosive when Truman became President.

Although project scientists, some people in the military and a few civilians were aware of the incalculable world importance of an atomic bomb, the President himself had been told nothing. Not only had the project been kept secret from him as a Senator and as Vice President, but also the immense scientific, military, civilian and moral implications of atomic fission had not been presented to him.

### ***Atomic Power Unchained***

Thus Truman was unprepared when Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson explained the atomic project to him on April 25, 1945—13 days after he had become President—and told him of the then presumed fantastic power of an atomic bomb. Apart from its staggering military potential, what impressed the President almost immediately were its implications for American diplomacy and world peace.

“If it explodes, as I think it will, I’ll certainly have a hammer on those boys,” he said, alluding to the Russians.

At the same time it was assumed by Truman and Stimson and virtually everyone connected with the atomic project that the bomb would be employed as a matter of course to shorten the Japanese war. The moral implications of its use and the total effect of atomics on United States-Soviet relations, later topics of vigorous debate, were not then publicly raised or widely appreciated.

Nevertheless, once an atomic device was tested and its destructiveness confirmed, Truman said in an interview in 1966 for this article that he had given the matter of actually using the bomb “long and careful thought.”

“I did not like the weapon,” he said, “but I had no qualms, if in the long run millions of lives could be saved.”

Against his critics—and there were many in after years—he took the responsibility for the atomic havoc inflicted on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The bombs, he maintained, did shorten the war and did save millions of American and Japanese battlefield casualties.

With the unconditional surrender of Germany on May 8, 1945, a meeting of Truman, Stalin and Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, became necessary to consider Europe's problems and to prepare, in accordance with Yalta, for Soviet entry into the Pacific war. Twice delayed by Truman pending the plutonium-bomb test at Alamogordo, N. M., the conference at Potsdam began July 17—the day Truman learned the bomb was a success—and lasted through Aug. 1. It was the President's only meeting with Stalin and his first with Churchill, with whom he formed a lasting friendship.

For all the popular hope that was invested in Potsdam and for all the grinding hours that the statesmen and their aides conferred, few European disputes were settled. Stalin pledged, however, to invade Japanese-held Manchuria early in August, and he subscribed to a surrender appeal to Japan that implied she could retain a constitutional Emperor.

Amid the Potsdam wrangles, Truman, by arrangement with Churchill, offhandedly informed Stalin of the bomb, but not that it was atomic.

“On July 24 I casually mentioned to Stalin that we had a new weapon of unusual destructive force,” Truman recalled. “The Russian Premier showed no special interest. All he said was that he was glad to hear it and hoped we would make good use of it against the Japanese:”

Tottering since June, Japan surrendered Aug. 14, 1945, after the atomic-bomb toll at Hiroshima and Nagasaki had exceeded a total of 100,000 lives and after the Russians had stormed into Manchuria. The victory was sealed on the battleship Missouri, in Tokyo Harbor, when Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the United States commander, accepted the capitulation of the Japanese. The global war, in which the United States had been engaged since 1941, was ended, and a new and different era was emerging.

In the war's course the United States created an industrial plant of unrivaled productivity, with a Gross National Product that soared from \$101-billion in 1941 to \$125-billion in 1945. Its citizens, meanwhile, accumulated millions in unspent cash. How to handle this new affluence without touching off a perilous inflation was the major concern of reconversion.

### ***Program for Prosperity***

The Truman program, given to Congress on Sept. 6, 1945, called for full employment, increased minimum wages, private and public housing programs, a national health program, aid to education, Negro job rights, higher farm prices and continuation of key wartime economic controls.

A President generally friendly to labor (he vetoed the Taft-Hartley bill in 1947), Truman stoutly refused what he considered exorbitant pay goals. In April, 1946, he seized the coal mines when John L. Lewis's 400,000 miners struck for more money. And in another strike that November, Lewis and his union were fined.

The contest between Truman and Lewis, both stubborn men, captured the headlines, with Lewis insisting that mine seizure by troops was a hollow gesture, because "you can't mine coal with bay onets," and with Truman appealing to the miners' patriotism. It was Lewis who yielded, as did the railway unions when the President seized the carriers in May, 1946, to avert a walkout.

If Truman turned out to be not a pet of labor, neither was he a darling to business and industry. He lifted price and profit controls gingerly, vetoed a \$4-billion tax cut in 1947, seized steel plants in a labor-and-price dispute in 1952 and increased the Federal budget.

Fair Deal programs met a mixed reaction in Congress, especially after the midterm elections of 1946 gave the Republicans a majority in both the House and the Senate. Truman proposals for broadening civil rights and for Medicare were shunned. In both areas he was in advance of his time, but he lived to see himself vindicated.

In 1965, when Congress passed the Medicare bill, President Johnson journeyed to Missouri to sign the measure in Truman's presence. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 reflected many of Truman's aspirations for Negro equality.

President Truman fared better on unification of the armed forces into a Department of Defense and on establishment of an Atomic Energy Commission. On taxes, price controls and union regulation, his relations with Congress were not uniformly smooth.

"I discovered that being President is like riding a tiger," he remarked afterward. "A man has to keep on riding or be swallowed."

Truman's individuality was also reflected in Cabinet changes. The Roosevelt Cabinet, save for James V. Forrestal as Secretary of Defense, was dismembered by 1948. Some departures were summary, as with Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr. and Commerce Secretary Henry A. Wallace.

Wallace was discharged in the fall of 1946 in an uproar over a speech that seemed to contradict the President's hard Soviet policy. Wallace had thought his remarks were approved by the White House, but it turned out that Truman had only glanced at the text.

Other appointments brought Gen. George C. Marshall, whom Truman revered, into the Cabinet as Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense; Dean Acheson, whose intellect Truman admired, as Secretary of State; and John C. Snyder, whose financial acumen the



President respected, as Treasury Secretary. James F. Byrnes served briefly as Secretary of State and was dropped in a personality clash.

Truman's foreign program was to combat Communist expansion and to strengthen what he called the free world. Supported by Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg and other leading Republicans, this policy became bipartisan in its major aspects. Backed by American economic and atomic power, it was remarkably successful. In China, however, the Nationalist Government collapsed despite American exertions, and the Communists took over in 1949.

But in the Middle East the Soviet was obliged to withdraw from Iran. In Yugoslavia a non-Stalinist regime developed. There was outstanding success in Europe, thanks to the Truman Doctrine, inaugurated in 1947.

In that year Britain, for lack of money, had to halt her subventions to Greece and Turkey, nations under heavy Communist pressure. With great dispatch, Truman convinced Congress it should extend cash help. This historic action, he said later, was "the turning point" in damming Soviet expansion in Europe, because it "put the world on notice that it would be our policy to support the cause of freedom wherever it was threatened."

The President's doughty action kept Greece and Turkey in the Western orbit, and the Truman Doctrine was the logical base for the Marshall Plan, enunciated by Secretary of State Marshall in the summer of 1947. Under it, the United States invited all European nations to cooperate in their economic recovery, with billions of dollars in American backing.

Western Europe, on the brink of economic disaster, responded favorably, achieving stability and eventually a new prosperity. The Marshall Plan, or the European Recovery Plan as it was formally named, "helped save Europe from economic disaster and lifted it from the shadow of enslavement by Russian Communism," Truman said.

Truman's leadership of the non-Communist world was reflected in vigorous support of the United Nations. Through its mechanism he hoped to keep world peace by positive actions, as well as by thwarting Soviet power plays and intrigues. Moscow, for its part, appeared bent on trouble-making both in the United Nations and out of it.

The Soviet strategy of trying to humiliate the United States had a crucial test in 1948, when the Russians blockaded Berlin by land in an effort to force the United States to quit the city. Truman resisted, and under his direction an American airlift was organized to fly food and medicines into that beleaguered city. The airlift, in which hundreds of planes participated over many months, forced the Russians to back down.

Soviet-American clashes intruded into domestic politics, especially After the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic device in 1949. A vocal segment of public opinion asserted that the Russians could only have mastered atomics by stealing American secrets. Outcries led to

heated charges of Communist infiltration in high Government places. In time a loyalty-security program was set up for Government employees and defense workers.

But disquiet, fear and suspicion spread in the land. In vain Truman sought to establish calm and a sense of perspective that could be gained through judicial proceedings against suspected spies and disloyal persons.

As Truman's first term came to a close, he was accounted successful in foreign affairs and beset by domestic ones.

He had won recognition as a person in his own right, but there was dispute over the degree to which the country liked what he had become—dogged, scrappy, “right in the big things, but wrong in the small ones,” as House Speaker Sam Rayburn phrased it.